

A TRAVELLER'S GLANCE

Antonioni in China

IT IS UNDERSTANDABLE that Michelangelo Antonioni, one of the few Western directors permitted to film in China during the Cultural Revolution, was able to catch only a ‘quick glance’ of the country, as he put it in his 1972 documentary, *Chung Kuo-Cina*; time constraints and the political situation did not allow him to do otherwise. But what a glance! The film galvanized the PRC in a mass campaign against the director and touched off diplomatic incidents across Europe; four decades later, it would again stir intense but very different responses among Chinese viewers. In between, *Chung Kuo* had become that intriguing oxymoron: a well-known obscure film. The least seen and least studied of Antonioni’s works in the West, in China its notoriety was once inversely matched by the number of its viewers—it was the film that everybody deplored but almost nobody had watched.

In early 1974, a year after the TV release of *Chung Kuo* in Italy and the United States, the PRC government launched a massive political campaign to ‘Criticize Antonioni’s Anti-China Film’.¹ The press harangued the Italian director for his ‘hostility towards Chinese people’, calling him an imperialist hack, a reactionary revisionist and a fascist. They accused him of selecting specific materials and using ‘despicable tricks’ to present a drab and distorted view of the new China, ignoring its industrial modernization and social progress.² The film was banned and Chinese diplomats were dispatched to block its release in various European countries. In 1977, Beijing protested about the screening of *Chung Kuo* at the Venice Biennial and tried—unsuccessfully—to get it cancelled. The furore prompted Umberto Eco to publish an essay called ‘*De Interpretatione*, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo’, in which he tried to see the issue

from a ‘Chinese point of view’: it was their profoundly different experience of modernity and politically conscious visual aesthetic that led the Chinese to misread Antonioni’s film, Eco argued.³ Joining the debate in the *New York Review of Books*, Susan Sontag assailed what she saw as a clichéd and didactic system of image culture in the People’s Republic, which prevented the Chinese from appreciating Antonioni’s art.⁴

The *Chung Kuo* controversy is by no means a unique inter-cultural phenomenon. Louis Malle’s *Phantom India*, a similar type of ‘observer-documentary’ made for television in 1969, provoked ‘indignation in officialdom’ in India.⁵ Sontag’s own documentary on the Yom Kippur war, *Promised Lands* (1973), was criticized and banned in Israel. In addition, a hostile reception of his work was no novelty for Antonioni: *Il grido* (1957) had aroused the ire of Italian Communists; *L'avventura* was greeted by catcalls at its Cannes premiere in 1960; *Zabriskie Point* (1970) was derided and ridiculed by American critics.⁶ In a 1974 interview, Antonioni made clear that he was well aware of the internal conflicts that lay behind the ‘scene’ the Chinese government was making.⁷ He surmised that his film was being used as a pretext by Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and the Shanghai Group to attack Zhou Enlai, who had approved his visit to the PRC. An episode of the *Pi Lin Pi Kong*—‘Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius’—movement, the campaign was part of a larger struggle to determine the future course of China, not just in the wake of the most destructive and decentring phase (1966–69) of the Cultural Revolution, but also in anticipation of the post-Mao era. Whereas Zhou

¹ In Italy, *Chung Kuo* was broadcast by RAI as a three-part TV series in January–February 1973; in the US, a condensed version had been shown on ABC as a primetime special in December 1972, following Nixon’s February visit to China. I would like to express my gratitude to Mary Ann Carolan at Fairfield University, with whom I began working on the question of the China–Italy encounter in Spring 2011.

² See ‘A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks: A criticism of Mr Antonioni’s anti-China film *China*’, originally published in *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*), reprinted in *Peking Review*, vol. 17, no. 5, 1 February 1974, pp. 7–10.

³ Umberto Eco, ‘*De Interpretatione*, or the Difficulty of Being Marco Polo’, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 4, Summer 1977.

⁴ Susan Sontag, ‘Photography Unlimited’, *New York Review of Books*, vol. 24, no. 11, 23 June 1977.

⁵ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, Oxford 1983, p. 249.

⁶ See William Arrowsmith, *Antonioni: The Poet of Images*, New York 1995; Sam Rohdie, *Antonioni*, London 1990, p. 137.

⁷ For the interview, see Michael Stern, ‘Antonioni: Enemy of the People’, *The Saturday Review/World*, 18 May 1974, pp. 14–5.

was in the forefront of the ‘opening-up’ initiatives following Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, Jiang Qing and her allies used their control of the media to try to check a ‘backslide’ to the ‘capitalist road’; engagement with the West was viewed as a threat to China’s revolutionary purity. Within this context, it is clear that the issue at stake is not one of essentialist cultural differences; indeed, the distinctive trait which Antonioni himself had identified in his work, ‘a certain trust in the interpretative capacities of the viewer’,⁸ was by no means alien to Chinese visual-art traditions, especially the genre of literati painting, which values aesthetic suggestiveness and ambiguity. But if, as Roland Barthes suggested, Antonioni’s subtlety ‘has a relationship with the Orient’, this Orient was fiercely repressed during the anti-traditionalist Cultural Revolution.⁹

A missing link

As Eco and Sontag suggested, *Chung Kuo* may have looked too cool-coloured, elusive and ambiguous for a country which, at the time, revered brightness, theatricality and revolutionary heroism. But how did it fare in the West? Some of Antonioni’s critics complained that the material was ‘repetitive and at times rather obvious’; it would be unfavourably compared to Joris Ivens’s more celebratory *How Yukong Moved the Mountains* (1976), for example.¹⁰ Yet the truth is that *Chung Kuo* was soon lost in the wild vines of indifference. Briefly mentioned in books on Italian cinema and documentaries, it is generally skipped in English-language monographs and collections of essays devoted to Antonioni.¹¹ Considering that other ‘mature’ Antonioni films generated such a huge body of critical work, the very lean scholarship on *Chung*

⁸ Interview given to Gideon Bachmann, ‘Antonioni after China: Art versus Science’, *Film Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 4, Summer 1975, p. 30.

⁹ Roland Barthes’s address, ‘Dear Antonioni . . .’, given in Bologna in January 1980 when the director was awarded the Archiginnasio Prize, was published in *Cahiers du cinéma*’s special issue, *Deux grands modernes: Bergman—Antonioni*, August 2007, pp. 85–7.

¹⁰ John Francis Lane, ‘Antonioni Discovers China’, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1973, p. 87. See Thomas Waugh, ‘*How Yukong Moved the Mountains*: Filming the Cultural Revolution’, *Jump Cut*, nos 12/13, 1976, pp. 3–6.

¹¹ Exceptions are Sam Rohdie’s *Antonioni*, which gives the film lengthy and insightful treatment; Seymour Chatman’s *Antonioni, or The Surface of the World*, Berkeley 1985, has a chapter devoted to both *Zabriskie Point* and *Chung Kuo*; and the film is touched upon in John David Rhodes’s ‘Antonioni and the Development of Style’, in Laura Rascaroli and John David Rhodes, eds, *Antonioni Centenary Essays*, Basingstoke 2011.

Kuo is perplexing. Is it because the film has been absent on the circuit of distribution for so long?¹² Did the controversy that greeted its reception deflect attention from its aesthetic significance? Or was the film such a departure from the kind of European art cinema for which Antonioni was best known that it came to be regarded as an anomaly, not worth in-depth examination?

There is no doubt that *Chung Kuo* occupies a unique place within Antonioni's *oeuvre*: it is his only full-length documentary and was originally shot for TV broadcast. Nonetheless, it remains important to an understanding of his later work. The reverberations of the *Chung Kuo* scandal may be detected in his next film, *The Passenger* (1974), where the passage of the TV reporter Locke (Jack Nicholson) from optimism to despair, as he assumes the identity of a dead gunrunner he had befriended in Africa, perhaps speaks to Antonioni's own disillusionment. The experience of *Zabriskie Point* may also be of relevance to *Chung Kuo*: the two protagonists carry the collective anger of anti-establishment youth culture in 1960s America, which crescendos in an apocalyptic anti-capitalism in the final sequence; together with the mainstream American outrage at the film, this may have helped convince the Beijing authorities that Antonioni would be the right director for a documentary project about China.¹³ But the debacle of *Zabriskie Point*—‘one of the most expensive failures’¹⁴ of its day—begs the question: why was Antonioni willing to take on another foreign country? The director's reaction was revealing. Interviewed about the angry US reception of *Zabriskie Point*, Antonioni insisted: ‘I am not an American, and I shall never tire of repeating that I do not claim to have done an American film. But why deny legitimacy to a foreign, detached observation?’¹⁵ This belief in the validity of an outsider's detached view could well have been carried over to the making of *Chung Kuo*.

There are deeper connections between *Chung Kuo* and Antonioni's other work. Scholars have long remarked on the intense ‘seeing’ in Antonioni's major fiction films. Dudley Andrew in his analysis of *Blow-Up* (1966)

¹² The film was released on DVD with English subtitles in March 2012.

¹³ This can only be a hypothesis until the full information on how Antonioni was selected for the project becomes available and verifiable.

¹⁴ Chatman, *Antonioni, or the Surface of the World*, p. 160.

¹⁵ Marga Cottino-Jones, ed., *Michelangelo Antonioni, The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema*, Chicago 2007, p. 96.

described Antonioni's world as a 'diagram of sight'.¹⁶ Sam Rohdie traces an aesthetics of seeing-as-discovery in some of Antonioni's earliest documentary shorts, such as *Gente del Po* (1947) and *N.U.* (1948). Commenting on the camerawork of *Gente del Po*, Rohdie observes:

Just as the feelings he senses in others are not named, neither are his own feelings made clear. What he sees, where the camera rests, mark a fascination, not an explanation. Antonioni is not being coy; he doesn't know. The purpose of making a film is to discover things, but the film is not the consequence of that discovery, rather the process of it. This gives not only the *Po* documentary, but all his films, a concreteness and immediacy of image combined with a vagueness of meaning.¹⁷

The fascination with 'what the filmmaker doesn't know', with the dialectic between the visible and the invisible, is a central feature of *Chung Kuo*—as is the interplay of documentary immediacy and ambiguous meaning.

Journeying east

The project for a major TV documentary on China had been initiated by the Italian state broadcasting corporation, RAI, in conjunction with the Chinese Embassy in Rome; behind it lay an agreement to 'promote bilateral relations through cultural interactions', the outcome of an Italian government delegation's visit to China in May 1971. According to Chinese sources, RAI had proposed both the film and the name of Antonioni.¹⁸ When he and his team arrived in Beijing in 1972, most of the country was still inaccessible to Western visitors, and throughout their five-week journey, the logistics were in the hands of official government minders. Nevertheless, Antonioni was able to shoot some 30,000 metres of footage and finally produced a 220-minute film.¹⁹

Despite its length, Antonioni's Western critics would complain about the film's lack of depth and substance. There is an element of truth to that

¹⁶ Dudley Andrew, 'The Stature of Objects in Antonioni's Films', *TriQuarterly*, no. 11, Winter 1968, p. 46.

¹⁷ Rohdie, *Antonioni*, p. 27.

¹⁸ See Chen Donglin, 'The Incident of *Chung Kuo*', *Dangshi Bolan*, vol. 6, 2006.

¹⁹ If the length seems fitting for a film that takes an entire country as its subject, it is still much shorter than two other documentaries to which *Chung Kuo* is often compared: Malle's *Phantom India* and Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, which last six hours and eleven hours respectively.

criticism: at first sight, *Chung Kuo* does have a certain impressionistic, episodic and, to some extent, predictable look. Antonioni and his crew—among them the cameraman Luciano Tovoli and journalist Andrea Barbato, co-author with Antonioni of the commentary—followed an itinerary not uncommon for foreign visitors in 1970s China: a solid stay in the capital, a restricted journey to a showcase rural village in Linxian, guided tours of two popular heritage cities, Suzhou and Nanjing, and the final destination of Shanghai. The film's elusiveness is accentuated by its aural minimalism: the voice-over commentary is laconic; not a single interview is included, although numerous Chinese voices are recorded on the ambient soundtrack. Small wonder that the film is faulted for its travelogue quality; except that a traveller is precisely what Antonioni saw himself as being:

These five weeks permitted only a quick glance: as a voyager I saw things with a voyager's eye. I tried to take the film spectator with me, to take him by the hand, as it were, and have him accompany me on this trip. Also, social and political structures are abstract entities which are not easily expressed in images. One would have to add words to those images, and that wasn't my role. I had not gone to China to understand it, but only to see it. To look at it and to record what passed under my eyes.²⁰

To see and film the country as a passing voyager, not as a penetrating ethnographic filmmaker, was of course a practical strategy to accommodate the restrictive time-frame. But it was also a deliberate choice. Antonioni was conscious of the cultural-ideological baggage he carried with him coming east, of the peril of falling for the 'China temptation'.²¹ He was well aware that for a Westerner in the early 1970s, the allure of China as the exotic Orient was outdated. Both in look and spirit, *Chung Kuo* departs from conventional ethnographic documentary. Antonioni provides little account of his own subjective experience; the filmmaker remains behind the camera, his presence felt only in the intelligence of its gaze and in the commentary, sympathetic yet unillusioned. He offers the targeted audience at home neither cultural exoticism nor visual spectacles; the landscape, although extraordinary, holds no mystery to be unravelled.

Chung Kuo's un-stylish, plain look is a far cry from the polish and fashion of Antonioni's earlier fiction films, especially his exquisitely composed

²⁰ Quoted in Bachmann, 'Antonioni After China: Art Versus Science', p. 29.

²¹ Cottino-Jones, ed., *Antonioni, The Architecture of Vision*, p. 108.

tetralogy of alienation: *L'avventura*, *La notte*, *L'eclisse* and *Deserto rosso*.²² It also lacks the psychological complexity and erotic affect that suffuse the latter. Almost everything shown on the screen takes place in public spaces or institutions; little intimacy is shown. The only close interpersonal relationships that are visible are those between friends or family members: chatting on a bench or in a tea house, sharing a meal in a popular restaurant; a baby cradled in the arms of its father or mother. The exclusively non-erotic social interactions are unsurprising for the genre that *Chung Kuo* ostensibly belongs to; but they also reflect the overlapping social and cultural norms that governed what was seen and what could be seen publicly in China during the time. While the 'old' decorum-conscious cultural codes still kept their hold on people's behaviour in public, the 'new' sexual puritanism left little space for privacy and pleasure.

Slipping free

The restricted purview had a more direct source: government mandate. According to one commentator, the early 1970s was a time when visitors to China would find themselves in 'an abstract world conceived by Maoist bureaucrats especially for foreign guests'. Such trips were 'always superbly organized', while 'anything that might be unpredictable, unexpected, spontaneous or improvised is ruthlessly eliminated'.²³ But Antonioni did not come to China as a credulous and submissive visitor. Intense negotiations with Chinese officials over the planning of the team's itinerary no doubt left him wary of the challenges the authorities might pose to his filming. His decision to use a small, light-weight camera for the project, made in consultation with some experts before coming to China, turned out to facilitate his effort to circumvent official restrictions.²⁴ The voice-over commentary for the Italian audience reveals the various methods and tricks that the crew resorted to in order to get the footage or the effects that Antonioni wanted: they pretend to abide by the order to stop filming as they pass the gate-house to Mao's

²² The film's grainy texture and subdued colour are due in part to the light-weight camera that Antonioni adopted for this project. It may also have been a deliberate choice to achieve a certain *cinema-vérité* or newsreel effect.

²³ Simon Leys, *Chinese Shadows*, New York 1974, p. 2. Leys, however, has little sympathy for the denounced filmmaker, suggesting that a film by 'a puny charlatan like Antonioni' would not have been so massively criticized were it not for the CP dictatorship's 'pathetic inferiority complex' towards the West: *Chinese Shadows*, pp. 210–1.

²⁴ See Carlo di Carlo in *Le regard imposé*, a video included in the 2009 French DVD version.

residence, but instead let the camera roll on. At one point, Antonioni opens the car door and threatens to jump out, so that they can film a rural free market; on another occasion, they venture off course to explore a much poorer village, despite the complaints from the village head.

For his Chinese critics, these ‘sneaky’ tactics constituted an unforgiveable affront. For viewers on more neutral ground, Antonioni’s ‘stolen glances’, in the form of skewed angles and jumpy hand-held shots, not only point to the forbidden but transmit the tension involved in approaching those zones. They also become a foil for some of the more obviously staged encounters: a couple preparing a fish dinner in their apartment, a stilted workers’ study group. The impromptu dynamism of the hand-held camera, palpable in its various attempts to dash out of the marked perimeters, sharpens the viewer’s awareness of the sedated to-be-seenness of pre-established scenes. Conspicuous among the latter are two spectacles Antonioni dutifully records, a puppet orchestra and an acrobatic performance which bring to a close the Beijing and Shanghai chapters, respectively. Both scenes feel tryingly long thanks to the artificial lighting and the immobile camera. Intriguingly, however, they can take on an ironic reflectiveness when viewed in the larger context of the film. While the performing puppets, at once animated and wooden, serve as an obvious metaphor for Chinese political and cultural apparatuses, the spectacle of the acrobatic performance is turned on its head by Antonioni’s extremely long takes, which allow us to realize that the show, apparently dazzling, is humourless, trite and tedious at its core. It stakes its success almost entirely on technical skills, clock-work accuracy and militantly rigorous group coordination. Still, one is not sure if the ironic effect is intended by the director or simply a result of the objective *mise-en-scène*, which leaves the meaning open to interpretation.

Scattered throughout *Chung Kuo* are many seemingly random ‘glances’ that give us the feel of Antonioni the traveller, filming whatever catches his eye. Often the meanings of the images are quite self-evident. Scene after scene is devoted to groups or individuals practising tai-chi, by the roadside or in public squares or parks. Meanwhile, he also directs our attention to a competing form of physical exercise, the so-called *guangbo ticao*, or ‘radio gymnastic exercise’, a form of group calisthenics institutionalized in primary and secondary schools all over the country from the early 1950s. The contrast is stark: the tai-chi practitioners move silently, with intense concentration, to a slow, inner-directed rhythm; the

young people in the *guangbo ticao* classes treat the exercise as an obligatory routine and go through the motions mechanically. The coexistence of old and new takes on additional significance in the context of the radical anti-traditionalism of the Cultural Revolution. The *guangbo ticao* scenes also resonate with other scattered visual segments: pre-school children singing revolutionary songs without understanding the lyrics, kindergarteners making propaganda dance moves, a youth brigade en route to the fields, marching along chanting slogans. Despite his expressed affection for the children he met in China and the tenderness in his attentive regard, Antonioni shows us the stultifying ideology that was visibly shaping the physiques, gestures and gaits of these future Chinese citizens; and invisibly, perhaps, their minds as well.

Antonioni's critical slant can take a more subtle form. In Nanjing, for example, the camera offers a wide-angled pan across the central square, taking in passers-by, trucks and bicycles, and the giant billboards with their propaganda posters portraying the holy trinity of the Cultural Revolution: worker, peasant, soldier. The camera then cuts to a medium shot of a young man and a young woman in military uniform, picked out from the crowd; it follows them sideways as they walk past the poster, then tilts up from the female soldier to zoom in on her vigilant-looking billboard counterpart. The improvised tilt suggests that the real woman shares a relationship with her painted 'cliché' in the poster; yet simultaneously—the camera can no longer see the real couple—it suggests a discrepancy between the two. The blank is left for the viewer to fill in.

Interposed with these meaning-laden images are those of a more tentative or contingent nature. How to interpret, for example, a long tracking shot of a man cycling, hands-free, down a Beijing boulevard, practising graceful tai-chi moves as he pedals along? If the image suggests an uninhibited form of self-expression, of freedom, Antonioni does not insist on any particular meaning, political or otherwise. It is simply a fleeting glimpse, caught on camera by happenstance. Images like this recall cinema's early aspiration to 'catch life *sur le vif*', to document the quotidian and the evanescent.²⁵ Even in its most mundane moments, the camera here reveals a director with an uncanny grasp of the rhythm and texture of Chinese everyday life. In Shanghai, newly washed bed-sheets are fluttering in the sunshine from the upper-floor balcony of a block of workers' flats, a breeze is rustling the leaves on the trees, little

²⁵ Barnouw, *Documentary*, p. 251.

children are playing outside, left to their own devices, some watching as a sanitation worker gets ready to drive off in his truck; watched by a friend, two boys play ping-pong on a makeshift table. As with the sunlight illuminating the bed-sheets, Antonioni's camera captures what Roland Barthes would call the phenomenological: free of clichés, in no particular order; something that arises from the visible but escapes it. Images are precise in time and place, yet they also feel like memory: atmospheric, fragmentary, yet poignant and timeless. Here, incidentally, Antonioni has touched a deep fold in the fabric of Chinese life, which remained serenely unruffled despite the agitation of social and political forms going on outside.

Barthes himself, as he revealed in his famous paean, 'Dear Antonioni...', developed a desire to visit China after seeing *Chung Kuo*. Yet the French writer was acutely bored there during his trip in 1974 with the *Tel Quel* group; for a semiotician who found poetry in interstices and ambiguities, the Chinese fabric was unbearably opaque—a 'text without a gap'—while Maoist discourse amounted to no more than 'fanatical monologism'. He mused that if the impressions he jotted down in his notebooks were published, just as they were, 'it would be exactly a piece of Antonioni'.²⁶ But how different the two travellers were! Barthes was hoping for the literary eroticism and absolute cultural alterity he had found in Japan. There, the allure lay in the country's 'unheard-of symbolic system', radically different from that of the West, as Barthes rejoiced in *Empire of Signs*. Its contemporary reality, with its 'vast regions of darkness'—'capitalist Japan, American acculturation, technological development'—was of no interest to him, and he claimed to have taken no photographs.²⁷ Antonioni was also attracted to remnants of an older order—tai-chi practice, courtyard houses, *hutong*, the tea house—yet these are always situated in their immediate contemporary settings. Their functions in the present make it impossible to turn them into signs and symbols in an imaginary Orientalist landscape.

Tinkles and brays

Another dimension of *Chung Kuo*'s contemporaneity is conveyed through a low-key but superb use of sound and music; Antonioni's ears were acutely attuned to the times. The faint, intermittent ringing of

²⁶ Barthes, *Travels in China*, trans. Andrew Brown, Cambridge 2012, pp. 195, 192.

²⁷ Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard, New York 1982, pp. 3, 4.

bicycle bells, recorded in the ambient sound of the Beijing and Shanghai sections, registers the unmistakeable timbre of Chinese urban life in the 1970s—indeed, throughout its modern but pre-automobile era. This quiet soundtrack, underlying Antonioni's thoughtful Italian voice-over, is in jarring contrast with the most important piece of non-diegetic music, the numbingly repetitive and bombastic children's song *I Love Beijing Tiananmen*, which blares over the opening and closing titles of each of the film's three sections, and formed part of the daily routine in Chinese primary schools at the time. Yet the anthem also highlights one of the main concerns of the film, mentioned in the commentary: the effects of propaganda on the very young. Another staple genre of Chinese radio programming during this period, 'revolutionary' Peking Opera, provides a moment of inadvertent comedy when the Italian team is taken to film a model pig farm. Chinese critics later accused Antonioni of maliciously dubbing a Peking Opera aria, 'Raise your head, open your chest', over footage of a pig leaping to its feet. Umberto Eco attributed this to an accidental blunder, which might have been avoided with better cultural advice.²⁸ However, it is quite likely that the music was actually being broadcast at the time through the farm's loudspeakers. (Even if it was not simultaneously recorded but mixed into the soundtrack later, it is not off base at all.)

In fact, it was *Chung Kuo*'s narrative reticence, aural naturalism and indeterminate images, which did not confer explicit meanings upon their subject, that allowed Antonioni's Chinese critics to infer his 'despicable' motives. But if his observational approach created an ambiguity that made the film vulnerable to political attack, it also rendered it useless for any propagandistic agenda. The impression one takes away from *Chung Kuo* is inconclusive: China is not a land of poverty and backwardness, as the PRC authorities claimed the film was out to show; but neither is it a proletarian paradise, as they wished it to be seen. In particular, to those who regarded Maoist China as a revolutionary experiment that presented an alternative to the political and social malaise of the West, a hope that Antonioni perhaps harboured before coming to China, the film offered an ambiguous answer.

To some extent, this ambiguity lies in the conditions of the documentary project. Limited to a preplanned itinerary, without the freedom to

²⁸ Eco, 'De Interpretatione', p. 11.

explore his subject in more depth—or, indeed, to delve into the still ongoing political persecution—Antonioni was unwilling to generalize from the few glimpses he was given. Unable to penetrate the intimate side of Chinese life or, perhaps, the language barrier, he accepted the opportunity he was offered to capture some of the look, the surfaces, of this forbidden country. Yet this practical accommodation also meshed with the ‘existentialist’ style for which he is known. In a 1979 interview, he spoke of the melancholy he felt on his journeys—that of ‘not being able to participate in the reality that I see; of always being an outsider and, as such, condemned to seeing a reality that is affected as soon as it comes into contact with my own.’ In other words, the filmmaker concluded, ‘observing reality is only possible on a poetic level’.²⁹ Foreign countries would constitute an alienating reality that Antonioni confronted again and again in his major films. His traveller’s gaze at China is consistent with his overall film aesthetic, not least his perpetual interrogation of ‘the surface of the world’, or ‘the sheer appearance of things’.³⁰ Still, an important difference enters in the case of China. While in his earlier feature films he relied on visual surface to express alienation as *depth*—be it of individual life experience, or the social relations of a consumerist West, in *Chung Kuo* such alienation loses its psychological and existential dimensions, displaced by sheer foreignness. In other words, the foreignness of China makes ‘alienation’ an impossible subject for Antonioni to deal with at the figural and symbolic levels, for it is no longer a condition that arises from within, but a reality that envelops him from without.

Answering looks

Yet if Antonioni’s ‘sideways gaze’ at China is detached, it conveys no sense of anxiety.³¹ The camera remains curious but serene, engaged yet also composed. In terms of visual effects, the highly wrought qualities of his earlier films are almost entirely absent. The documentary shimmers between the routine and the lyrical, the immediate and the suggestive, the visible and the invisible. Predictable footage alternates with extraordinary encounters which, without linguistic mediation, are stripped down to the bare bone of gaze. As the lens widens before the landscape of the rural interior, or the waterways of Suzhou, Nanjing and Shanghai,

²⁹ Cottino-Jones, ed., *Antonioni, The Architecture of Vision*, p. 202.

³⁰ Chatman, *Antonioni, or the Surface of the World*, p. 2.

³¹ Barthes, *Travels in China*, p. 177.

we see Antonioni's familiar enchantment with the river, its visual beauty as well as its symbolism of mutability and change. Yet there is no hint of desolation here, no miasma of melancholy of the sort that hangs over the rivers in his European films. The landscape in *Chung Kuo* is decidedly not a 'distanced, alienated terrain'.³² Significantly, too, the camera does not pan away from people to landscape, as so often in Antonioni's earlier films. Actually it does the opposite: travelling from the landscape to the people, and remaining there. In the end, what stands out among the myriad visual impressions the filmmaker captures is neither the natural scenery nor the historical sites, but the ordinary people—their gestures, customs and, most intriguing of all, their faces.

In cities, as if pulled into the crowd, the camera moves from one person, or group of people, to another, often zooming in on faces in close-up. Thomas Waugh called *Chung Kuo* 'a physiognomical treatise' and found its 'silent faces' disturbing. Comparing it with Ivens's *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, he criticized Antonioni for rendering the Chinese 'mystified, exoticized, colonialized'.³³ There are indeed some uncomfortable moments in the film when viewers are aware of the silent and occasionally intrusive, even aggressive camera. In the opening sequence, the use of the zoom to steal close-ups of the young women waiting to have their photos taken in Tiananmen Square and, later, the filming of a flustered village crowd in Henan, may look dubiously voyeuristic. In the latter, most of the villagers scatter away, their eyes filled with curiosity as well as distrust, at the sight of the foreign crew and their camera—something they had probably never seen before. Taken in isolation, these shots could fit the definition of the Orientalist gaze, turning natives into the silent Other.

Yet Antonioni's self-awareness—registered in the voice-over commentary on his own foreignness and that of his crew, on his sense of his own cultural inadequacy—make it hard to pin on the Orientalist label. More important, he shows us that the camera can function not as an aggressor, but as a nexus of meeting gazes. In Nanjing and Shanghai, Antonioni takes advantage of the gawking crowds who surround the camera to create a *mise-en-scène* of reflected looks: the curiosity of those who stare back at us from the screen reflects back the same rapt gaze we

³² Noa Steimatsky, *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema*, Minneapolis 2008, p. 38.

³³ Waugh, 'How Yukong Moved the Mountains', p. 155.

share with the invisible camera. Albeit a little shy, many of the people in the bustling Nanjing and Shanghai streets look straight into the camera, eyes wide open, some smiling broadly at what they see. Curiosity about the physiognomy of an alien race is shared by the filmmaker and his Chinese subjects. The mutual interest also captures the moment in historical time when the door of the country had opened just a crack—a first encounter between China and the West, after a two-decade hostile stand-off. In this sense, too, the images are phenomenological: even if they suggest the vast space of the unknowable that the filmmaker's camera cannot penetrate, and even if the two parties may not see 'eye to eye', as it were, they are at least finally seeing each other 'face to face'. The space that Antonioni sustains between his camera and his Chinese subjects is, ideally, the space for future discovery and exploration.

A people's republic?

Antonioni's intense interest in the faces of ordinary people has a further resonance beyond its immediate time-frame. Discussing the cinema of the crowd, the Hungarian critic and writer Béla Balázs argued:

The living physiognomy of the crowd, the play of features of the face of the mass, can be depicted by a good director only in close-up, for only these ensure that the individual is not entirely forgotten and obliterated. The mass shown in close-up will never degenerate into something inert or dead, like fallen rock or a stream of lava . . . Assembling a series of foreground and middle-ground detail shots, he will show us the individual grains of sand that go to make up the desert, so that, even when gazing at the total picture, we still remain aware of the mass of individual atoms teeming with life within it. In these close-ups we sense the warm living feelings of which the great masses are composed.³⁴

The nameless people we glimpse in *Chung Kuo* leave an indelible impression, for they seem to exude the 'living feelings' both of the millions they represent and of their individual selves. Ordinary faces like these were not a favoured trope in traditional Chinese visual art; but Antonioni's portraits are particularly precious today because they constitute such a rarity in the country's modern visual archive. Never before have the Chinese seen so many live historical images of themselves; no other works of visual art produced during the Cultural Revolution gave such attention to the faces of *renmin*, the people who are 'ubiquitous

³⁴ Béla Balázs, *Early Film Theory*, New York and Oxford 2010, p. 42.

yet somehow invisible' in the country—that is, ubiquitous in the titles of socialist institutions, but invisible as real human beings.³⁵ In *Chung Kuo*, these ordinary faces act as myriad counter-parts to—or wordless commentaries on—the iconic Face of the Great Helmsman, which was both omnipresent and highly visible at the time, as duly noted in the film: in the portraits hung above the gates of Tiananmen, on the cover of a Little Red Book in a textile-worker's apartment, on the badges worn by the elderly regulars at the Yu Garden tea house. Yet it is women's faces that seem to predominate in *Chung Kuo*, representing, perhaps, the filmmaker's fascination at the conjunction of timeless Oriental femininity with the dramatic changes in gender roles in Mao's China. In Nanjing, the camera lingers for a moment on the lively eyes and sweet smiles of some attractive young women; yet it keeps turning to read the faces of women pulling carts, of female medics or sanitation workers, who are either oblivious of it or too tired to notice and respond.

In the cities, people are everywhere: in streets, parks, stores, factory gates. The camera, sometimes set up to film the swarming urban crowds head on, sometimes sideways, hungrily absorbs the thousands of faces flowing into its lens, or overflowing its field of vision. There is no suggestion in these faces of violent political fights or ideological battles; rather, they exude the normalcy and dynamism of revived urban life during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution. Nor do they evoke the old European nightmare about the Yellow Peril, since Antonioni's camera is so humanizing. One does, however, detect in them a tacit recognition of a banal yet significant aspect of China's reality—its enormous population. Moreover, the images tease at an intuition of the future: has Antonioni, in following the suggestion of Chinese officials to make a film about the 'new man', stumbled upon the nation's secret, which would only be revealed decades ahead? But in 1972, the image of China as the most energetic powerhouse of the world economy, the largest consumer-goods market and the most polluted place on earth was beyond anyone's imagination. So one wonders what was going on in Antonioni's mind, and what prompted him to utter these pessimistic words on his return:

I took a dive into unpolluted waters. Now I am back in the polluted ones of the West. As I am a pessimist by nature, I am afraid there is much

³⁵ Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*, New York 2011, p. 3.

more likelihood of China becoming polluted than there is of us getting depolluted.³⁶

Reverberations

Therein lies a further dimension of *Chung Kuo*'s relevance, when it is seen in China today by people who can intimately relate to the lives it depicts. The film got its first official screening in China in 2004, at the Beijing Film Academy, where it showed to a packed house. For many, the film arouses nostalgia with the potency of a time capsule.³⁷ The footage takes on a haunting quality, showing what took place in a country that is no more: cities have been reduced to rubble and rebuilt; streets are no longer filled with bicycles but cars. People look strange and familiar at the same time—their images existed mainly in old family photo albums; their dresses, hairstyles, even their gestures bearing the indelible marks of a bygone time.

Chung Kuo has also inspired a series of responses from Chinese artists: Cai Guoqiang's installation for the Galleria Civica di Arte Contemporanea in Trento, entitled 'Big White Truth from Antonioni's *Chung Kuo*' (2002), Pan Jun's documentary *Mask Changing: A Letter to Antonioni* (2004), Liu Haiping's documentary *China is Far Away: Antonioni and China* (2008), and choreographer Yin Mei's dance theatre conversation, *Antonioni in China* (ongoing). All of these artists grew up during the Cultural Revolution; some, like Yin Mei, have their own share of the experience of the anti-Antonioni mass campaign. But even on a younger Chinese filmmaker like Jia Zhangke, who was only two in 1972, Antonioni's film has made a deep impression. One of the most memorable sequences in *Chung Kuo*, set in a tea house in Shanghai's Yu Garden and featuring elderly Chinese drinking tea and conversing with each other, is replayed in Jia's documentary about Shanghai, *I Wish I Knew* (2010).

Intriguingly, after he freezes Antonioni's image of the tea house into a historical still, Jia invites us to revisit the place and listen to a

³⁶ John Francis Lane, 'Antonioni Discovers China', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 42, no. 2, Spring 1973, p. 87.

³⁷ One can gauge Chinese audiences' responses to the film by browsing popular websites such as www.douban.com or blog sites such as blog.sina.com.cn and www.my1510.cn.

middle-aged man reminisce about his own story related to *Chung Kuo*. Zhu Qiansheng, one of the minders who had accompanied Antonioni during the shooting in Shanghai, became a victim of the mass campaign against the film; he was taken to various original shooting locations and there on the spot received his portion of denunciation. The irony, Jia reveals, is that the man had never seen the film that got him into trouble. Although he once interfered with Antonioni's shooting of certain 'unseemly' scenes, he had no idea what footage was selected and included in the final cut. For a few seconds after the interview, the ex-minder sits lost in thought as he looks silently out of the window of the tea house, which Antonioni's camera had caressed so lovingly in *Chung Kuo*. But for Jia Zhangke, Zhu is also a protagonist in history who should be given a voice. By inviting him to come out from behind the scenes and speak out to the camera, Jia Zhangke is not only calling for a reflection on the destructiveness of the Cultural Revolution and the real-life tragedies of those persecuted during the political campaign against *Chung Kuo*; he is also paying homage to Antonioni's eye-opening film, which showed how ordinary people could be seen differently.

Antonioni was, of course, well aware of the limitations of his outsider's approach. In the voice-over, he warns against the illusion of equating appearance with inner truth, citing the famous Chinese saying: 'One can paint the skin of a tiger but not its bone, just as one can see a person's face but not his heart.' To be sure, his gaze is not that of a China-watcher, constantly scrutinizing current events and drawing on an in-depth knowledge of its historical development. Yet Antonioni has striven to turn that limitation into an advantage. In the end, his voyager's glance helped create a poetic tension that allowed the film to escape the obsolescence of some cinematic travelogues. In its most lyrical moments, the surfaces, social and visual, that Antonioni scans scintillate between the light of documentary immediacy and the shadow of ineffable historical atmosphere; what shines through is the medley of Chinese public life as it happens to take form at that particular moment, in 1972. It is this 'time rediscovered' in the present tense, with its sensuous combination of memory and contemporaneity, that endears *Chung Kuo* to viewers today, particularly in China. Meanwhile, by focusing on ordinary people, Antonioni put a human face on a country which at the time looked alien and moon-distant to Western eyes. His sensitive observation offered the promise, even if it turned out to be an unfulfilled one, of helping the West see a country that was irreducibly 'ordinary', and humanely so. This

not only challenged the two extreme Western perceptions of China—as a hellish state of political fanatics, or as a utopian land of revolution—but proposed the possibility of a new sort of relationship.

Chung Kuo's return to China speaks as much to the enduring value of Antonioni's art as to the change of era. Its initial death sentence by official ban, and its revival today, are the direct result of historical circumstance. For the Chinese government, agreeing to Antonioni for the film project was a huge miscalculation. It exposed serious problems within the Chinese hierarchy: profound disagreement as to the future course of the country, dire ignorance about contemporary Western culture and a kind of hermetic illiteracy about the difference between art and propaganda. One cannot help wondering whether the Chinese officials involved in the invitation would have recommended an alternative candidate if they had watched Antonioni's previous films more carefully. Yet Antonioni may have come to China with certain misplaced hopes, a political naivety that rendered him vulnerable as the leadership, seized with cultural paranoia, turned against him and unleashed torrents of xenophobic malice on him and his work. He did not realize that, by being true to his own practice as a filmmaker, he was already infringing upon the PRC's 'correct' view of itself; undermined by a deep economic-technological inequality and a long-standing fraught relationship between China and the West, his Marco Polo mission would be doomed to failure. Instead of bringing the two cultures closer together, *Chung Kuo* revealed how far apart they were. Since then, large-scale trade and economic interaction has brought China nearer and nearer to the West, every day; this in turn has stimulated a proliferation of images and words about the country. And yet, if many new China-related documentaries have generated more detailed information and in-depth knowledge than *Chung Kuo*, how many of them can match it in terms of art and vision? History, it seems, is finally catching up with Antonioni's travels. The shared curiosity, the mutual fascination so visibly alive in the locked gazes between camera and subject, is now much more of a reality, on many fronts. *Chung Kuo*, this untimely film, was ahead of its time; maybe it still is.